



Faculty of Design

2013

## Kapsula

Pearl, Zach

---

### Suggested citation:

Pearl, Zach (2013) Kapsula. Politics of Aesthetics 3/3, 1 . KAPSULA PRESS, Toronto, Canada. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/940/>

KAPSULA Magazine logotype and other headers are set in House Gothic Bold Number Four. Body copy is set in Garamond Premier Pro and/or ITC Garamond Standard. All text and images published herein are done so with permission of their respective owners. On the cover: JON RENZELLA Distant Shores 2011 Woodcut 23.5 x 32.25 in. / 60 x 82 cm <http://jrenzella.com>

*Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.*

*The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at [repository@ocadu.ca](mailto:repository@ocadu.ca).*





**POLITICS OF  
AESTHETICS**

**3/3**

**DEC 2013**





# WARP JOURNAL

## VOLUME 1 • THEME 2 • DECEMBER 2013

### POLITICS OF AESTHETICS 3/3

#### *Production*

---

EDITOR IN CHIEF /  
DESIGN /  
PUBLIC RELATIONS /

KAPSULA Magazine logotype and other headers are set in House Gothic Bold Number Four. Body copy is set in Garamond Premier Pro and/or ITC Garamond Standard. All text and images published herein are done so with permission of their respective owners.



KAPSULA is published under the Creative Commons Canada BY-NC-ND 3.0 license. You are legally and freely permitted to redistribute this document as many times as you wish without penalty. However, you may not attempt to edit the contents or sell access to its contents. For more information on what this entails and/or Creative Commons, go here:

#### *Contributors*

---

VANESSA NICHOLAS  
DIANA McNALLY  
WILLIAM BRERETON

#### *On the Cover*

---

JON RENZELLA  
*Distant Shores*  
2011  
Woodcut  
23.5 x 32.25 in. / 60 x 82 cm  
<http://jrenzella.com>



---

Connect with us through our *Facebook Page*

Tweet us *@KAPSULAMagazine*

Send us your feedback about the mag to *kapsula@kapsula.ca*

---

# HINTS



# circling the truth

*What is writing but an I insisting on its point of view.*

—Hilton Als

*I am beginning to realize that taking the self out of our essays is a form of repression.*

—Kate Zambreno

Originally, I had wanted this prologue to consist solely of quotations. A kind of chorus of voices, ringing out for writing the “I.” Somehow, searching externally for confirmation seemed more comfortable, more secure. But I couldn’t surmount the decided futility of that position—of using exclusively other writers to discuss ‘writing the self.’ It is surprising that such a frequent and long-standing form of writing should require any kind of introduction or disclaimer. How can ‘writing the self,’ which ultimately amounts to asserting a position of subjectivity, necessitate discussion?

Yet the concept has come under fire in the past several decades. It was deemed impossible when poststructuralist theory argued that, if subject positions were fragmented and fractured, there was no stable, constant self *to* write. The notion of an insistent, constant ‘I’ was put into storage along with other assorted humanist ‘rubbish.’

Perhaps some middle ground can be found, though. In the intervening years the social sciences have salvaged remnants of writing from personal perspectives in the form of autoethnography. This practice “has been promoted as an evocative and emotional writing technol-

ogy for postfoundational times.” [1] With new means of channelling the internal, while simultaneously refusing fixity, writing can balance both the personal and its ever-changing nature.

To borrow from literary critic Hélène Cixous, writing in an age after poststructuralism can “circle ‘the truth’ with all kinds of signs, quotation marks, and brackets, to protect it from any form of fixation or conceptualization.” [2] In this monthly, all the writers bear themselves in some way. They write their needs, their reactions, their fears and revelations. They circle.

The most obviously personal piece is Vanessa Nicholas’ “Seeing Less and Feeling More at the Venice Biennale.” Recounting her experience interviewing Shary Boyle at the Canadian Pavilion over the summer, Nicholas taps into the enormous sense of disappointment that such busy, fleeting events can incur. Channelling this experience, she launches a call-to-arms, of sorts, for an art criticism that takes time.

By contrast, Diana McNally’s “Affinitas and Aversus: Constructing Meaning in the Museum as Simulacrum” does not employ the ordinary markers of a personal text: first person pronouns rarely make an appearance, no anecdotes are included and so on. But keep this in mind: McNally’s essay was conceived after a trip to the bombastic South Beach of Miami, where she visited the Wolfsonian-FIA and experienced the very *aversus* that became the focus of the paper. Furthermore, the *aversus*—largely synonymous with the uncanny—is, at its core, a destabilization of self. Thus, her subject matter originates and focuses upon inherently personal experiences, but they’re experiences that leave their participants off-balance and unfixed.

Finally, William Brereton's "Surrealist Self-Portraiture: Aesthetic Mediations of Mixed-Race Women's Stories" threads together the work of painter Frida Kahlo and Canadian photographer Meryl McMaster. Brereton's essay critically unpacks his experience of two recent exhibitions—Frida Kahlo (at the Art Gallery of Ontario) and Meryl McMaster (at the Art Gallery of Peterborough). Brereton notes that, while both artists have stylistically Surrealist tendencies, their works are nevertheless grounded in everyday process of navigating the self—particularly when the self is constituted by numerous cultural identities.

From the start, one of KAPSULA's most essential mandates has been to provide a space for experimental art writing. Writing that needn't fall into a clear genre or exercise, but, instead, writing that could jump and circle and break in all manners. It seems curious then that, in a formal sense, the texts in this monthly are some of the most traditional essays we have published. However, I would argue that personal writing is always experimental writing. It demands some amount of you; it collects its pound of flesh. And, if leaving the self out, as Zambreno suggests, is a form of repression, then allowing its presence can be a form of therapy.







# SEEING LESS AND FEELING MORE AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

Between the long cues for the German and British pavilions in Venice's Giardini, Canada's representative, Shary Boyle, delivered her dedication text to a crowd of representatives from the press and glitterati alike. The text, which supports her exhibition project, "Music For Silence," is a sincere and moving poem that reveals Boyle's commitment to the transformative, healing properties of art. She spoke over the fairground to "the orangutan who lies dying as her forests are shredded and burned [and] all the women not listened to," as well as to "all the artists who are not invited to show, whose work is not welcome here."

Her installation is a darkened grotto where shadows, stars, moons and monsters prompt one to wonder at the horror and magic of simply existing. The project's most ambitious element, *The Cave Painter*, is a life-sized plaster cave that's home to a reclining wrinkled mermaid and her human baby. At intervals, a trio of overhead projectors prepared with collaged photo fragments animates the whitewashed tableau of mother and child. The effect is arresting, disturbing and engrossing as every inch of the oversized diorama's surface is charged with a forceful visual, like a knife, lightning bolt, atomic explosion, ape, spaceship, artist, skeleton, candle or eyeball. The work is a veritable visualization of Shakespeare's description of life as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But there is more hope in Boyle's work, if only because her collage fits the mermaid's abdomen with an image of shell, which references

both the womb and the coiled, mid-Century Canada pavilion itself. This layered visual metaphor underlines our capacity to be transformed by love and art; we can be reborn.

Following her presentation, Boyle stepped away from the microphone and accepted the polite applause. As prosecco poured, I restlessly awaited my interview slot with Boyle by imagining all that we could discuss: infinity, astrology, moons, music, loneliness, longing, feminism, Kate Chopin, Charlie Chaplin, Malala Yousafzai, Girls, grief and glitter. I was bursting and anxious, excited to connect and have a meaningful exchange with one of my favourite artists. I was fetched from my waking reverie by a PR agent, who led me behind the Canada pavilion to two folding chairs. Boyle appeared soon thereafter, and I eagerly switched on my tape recorder.

I'm no stranger to the pitch and pace of the Biennale vernissage, and I knew that the expansive, engrossing discussion I ached to have with Boyle was impossible under the circumstances; nevertheless, I was sure that our tête-à-tête could be one of those short-lived moments that I'd imagine recurring forever in some other dimension, like the time I lip-synced Taylor Swift's "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" with Tavi Gevinson. Consequently, when our interview was cut off after barely ten minutes and two warm-up questions, my heart sank. It was over before it began. The enlightened elation that had brightened my afternoon was dulled, and I was suddenly overwhelmed by how crushing the Biennale frenzy can be.

With twenty-nine national pavilions in the Giardini and an ever-growing number of offsite pavilions throughout the city, this international exhibition literally promises the world. Besides the troubling politics of the national pavilion model, which is mired in its colonial past and related questions of privilege, is the frustration that one simply cannot see everything. This defeating truth paradoxically motivates viewers, propelling them through pavilions at high speeds. There is a palpable pressure to judge work quickly and move on in pursuit of seeing more, even if this approach effectively limits the reward of looking altogether. This voracious vibe also plagues the field of art journalism, as my interview-interrupted evidences. The sounds bite is the order of the day now that writers are increasingly asked to serve up fast-food criticism. Consider, for example, that Canada's leading national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, maximizes its weekly art coverage with *The Twitter Critic: Three exhibitions in 140 characters each*. **Tweet it and weep.**

The Biennale's exhaustive nature is a timely subject considering that the event's current Director, Massimiliano Gioni, has audaciously excited our feverish art-anxiety this year by setting "The Encyclopedic Palace" as the curatorial theme for the central Arsenale exhibition. This subject pays tribute to Il Enciclopedia Palazzo Del Mondo, a utopian museum for all knowledge designed by Marino Auriti in the 1950s. Gioni writes, "Today, as we grapple with a constant flood of information, [Il Enciclopedia Palazzo Del Mondo seems] even more necessary and even more desperate." The same could be said of the Biennale itself, as globalization simultaneously necessitates and negates this exhibition model. While Auriti's plan for a 136-story museum over 16 city blocks is certainly awesome and absurd, we can't help but wonder if it may be less so than the microcosmic planet Art that we build over an entire island city every two years.

The Biennale's value is thus undercut by the old axiom: quality over quantity. This seemingly obvious declaration reminds me of another that I once noted during a lecture of Griselda Pollock's: "It takes time to make a painting, and it takes time to look at a painting." In preparation for my doomed interview with Boyle, I took those words to heart and slowed down for a closer look. In that stillness, I lost my words and started to cry; and finding that universal moment in Boyle's art trumps any satisfaction I could have gained from senselessly speeding through the art universe.

## *Vanessa Nicholas*

is a curator and writer based in Toronto, where she is Programmes Co-ordinator for the OCAD University Student Gallery. She graduated with an MA History of Art degree from the Courtauld Institute of Art (London, UK) in 2008.



# Affinitas and Aversus

## Constructing Meaning in the Museum as Simulacrum

DIANA McNALLY

We exist within an age where images and ideas proliferate without consensus. From the individualism of online opinion to the deconstruction of historical canons, the limitless, unchecked reproduction of unsorted information has undermined the notion of didactic authority, including that of cultural institutions such as the museum.

Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard characterizes this destructive process as deriving from his conception of the *simulacrum* which, as a result of its obfuscated, hyperreal state, has a singular and sinister outcome: the total destruction of reality. Yet, this need not be an inevitability, but merely one possibility for the simulacrum specific to Baudrillard's own, antipathetic point of view. Rather, all simulacra are capable of two experiential outcomes: either the *experienti aversus*, a sense of the *unheimlich*, or the *experienti affinitas*, a sense of nostalgia. The *aversus*, owing itself to Baudrillard's negativity, is characterized by the uncanny and a sensation of disquietude through defamiliarization. Its other, the *affinitas*, is linked to wistful affection for the familiar and a sensation of comfort. While the *aversus* and the *affinitas* have antipodal effects on the psyche, both are rooted in the flux of familiar versus unfamiliar, real versus hyperreal latent to the simulacrum. The museum, which embodies these characteristics of the simulacrum in addition to being a cultural authority, is, like all simulacra, capable of eliciting either sensation. But which of the two experiential outcomes should be privileged? While the *affinitas* seems the obvious choice as a result of its ties to pleasure, only the *aversus* offers an alterna-

tive to Baudrillard's chaotic predictions. The *aversus* enables simulacra to suggest the real as a direct result of its process of defamiliarization, not in spite of it: by deliberately disordering our extant knowledge base, new knowledge about the world can be created. In this fashion, the simulacrum exhibits its strength precisely where Baudrillard conceives its weakness. Its inability to represent truth directly offers a blessing in disguise: the simulacrum, i.e. the museum, can instead allude to the real by both generating and propagating multiple, even contrasting interpretations.

In "Simulacra and Simulation," Jean Baudrillard defines simulacra as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (166). That is, simulacra are not merely simulation or reproductions of the real, but beyond reality (170). He writes:

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum (170).



Thus, the act of representation is no longer that of copying. The processes of the simulacrum absorb the act of copying, allowing it to gain independence from that which it intended to emulate. Simulacra are therefore beyond mere simulation: they are autonomous, hyperreal entities.

As a primary example of the simulacrum, Baudrillard cites Disneyland:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of the country] is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation (176).

The American values supposedly concretized via Disneyland both produce and exceed simulation. Disneyland falls into Baudrillard's simulacrum in that the referent of America is destroyed by its own bizarre interpretation. America and "Americanness," as interpreted as real concepts, are exceeded by the hyperreality of a Disneyland that no longer represents them, but embodies only itself. Yet Disneyland's existence, as a perverse microcosm of American ideals, becomes intellectually fused with the original concept of America, distorting it without embodying it, and eventually effacing it. This elucidates the sinister nature of the simulacrum within the hands of Baudrillard: that, in attempting simulation, the simulacrum not only fails, but through its resultant autonomy simultaneously destroys that which it attempts to copy. This augments the hyperreality intrinsic to the simulacrum, the existence of which presupposes that there is no reality, or at least no reality that could ever be made knowable.

In this conception, the experience of the simulacrum is clearly negative, an effect deemed within this essay as the *experienti aversus*. The *aversus* is derived from Sigmund Freud's concept of *unheimlich*, literally unhomely, as defined in "The Uncanny." In this work, Freud describes the effect of *unheimlich* as deriving from the disordering of the familiar, and moreover of the sense of disquietude this process elicits (211). Freud cites the *doppelgänger*, or double, as an example

of *unheimlich*. This figure feeds into Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum in that both are ostensibly copies or simulated entities. They also unhinge the ordinary by obscuring their origin's "real" identity. The *doppelgänger*, in the eyes of Freud, evokes the *unheimlich* because it both displaces and questions the real. In translating this onto the simulacrum, the *experienti aversus* similarly induces anxiety through its own repositioning and eradication of reality.

This ominous outcome of the simulacrum is entrenched in Baudrillard's work. He writes,

[the] confusion of the fact with its model ... is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all are true in the sense that their truth is exchangeable (178).

This effacement of the referent/reality creates an unknowable state where the "[simulacrum] suggests, over and above its object, that law and order themselves might really be nothing more than simulation" (180). Beyond litigious definition, this reference to law and order hints at the dismantling of all ordering systems of the world, and thus of constructs of knowledge. This implicates the *experienti aversus* in Baudrillard's perceived state of chaos, suggesting that no new knowledge can be gained via the simulacrum.

While Baudrillard foresees a dire future, this essay contends that the *aversus* does not represent the only outcome of simulacra. Nostalgia, represented here as the *experienti affinitas*, also becomes a possibility. Nostalgia refers to a sentimental yearning for a condition that no longer exists, superficially as a result of the passage of time or, more apt to the simulacrum, because of its destruction via mnemonic reproduction. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek *nostos* and the Latin *algia* which, when combined, literally translate to "akin to returning home" ("Nostalgia"). Notable in this translation is the word akin, which suggests that nostalgia contains a certain impossibility of reproduction: a moment of recollection that is inevitably a misrecollection. While this strikes an accord with Baudrillard's

definition of the simulacrum, the sentimentality integral to nostalgia, and thus the *affinitas*, renders it a positive experience.

The identification of the *experienti affinitas* initially owes itself to Gilles Deleuze, who writes:

The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction (253).

The simulacrum, in maintaining its independence from reality, cannot impact any referent since there is none; its autonomy is total, and therefore its effects benign. However, what Deleuze fails to anticipate is that simulacra are rarely explicitly obvious; rather, they have a tendency to masquerade as reproductions that are both derivative and representative of certain truths. While the *experienti affinitas* is an agreeable sensation, it nevertheless diverges from Deleuze in that it masks the sinister verity that it is, like the *experienti aversus* as well as all simulacra, hyperreal.

Whether *aversus* or *affinitas*, the experience of simulacra is always mediated. These experiences are simultaneously produced and facilitated by their medium. This can occur in the present via direct, real-time engagement, or at a distance through spatial or temporal removal, or both. As well, this mediation can manifest through sensoria, such as hearing and vision, or its technological extensions, such as television. Uniquely, the institution of the museum is not only a mediator for the experience of simulacra, but also a simulacrum in-itself. According to the International Council of Museums' statutes, a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. The museum offers a lens through which its patrons perceive knowledge; therefore it serves as a mediator for audience experience. However, as a static, biased and synecdochical representation of the world, the museum is

also a simulacrum. Although its exhibitions posit a link to fact, they are in actuality interpretations completely autonomous from the real. Even with well-conducted research and the usage of "authentic" artifacts, exhibitions not only distort or destroy that which they are attempting to represent, but become independent entities in-themselves. This occurs through the selection of a particular curatorial prerogative, and through the binding power of an exhibition's title and the physical constraints of its specific location. Beyond its exhibitions, the museum as a whole collapses space and time by combining, for example, specific ethnographic, historical, or artistic samples together within the unified ensemble of the museum's entity through its mission statement, governance and collecting principles, as well as through its architectural whole. This dichotomy renders the museum as a *heterotopia*, a site described by Michel Foucault as juxtaposing in a single, physical location several spaces that are themselves incompatible, making them simultaneously representative of all places as well as none: a site of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages. For this reason, museums have a unique societal import as an interpretive authority capable of conditioning public knowledge. It therefore follows suit that they are responsible not merely for the content they present, but for our experience of them as well.

Given the museum's educational prerogatives and dual status as both mediator and simulacrum, which experience has greater value: *affinitas* or *aversus*? Although the *experienti affinitas* affirms the familiar, it may not be the ideal outcome for the museum; the sense of comfort it imparts is ultimately unchallenging. Because it panders to that which makes individuals feel "safe," the informative value of the *affinitas* is negligible, being reliant on what we already know. Moreover, because museal content that deliberately educes the *affinitas* contributes no new knowledge, it can aid in enforcing one of the most negative results of the simulacrum: the creation of stereotype.

As an alternative to the *affinitas*, the *experienti aversus* should instead be the aim of museal displays. While this may

seem counterintuitive considering its links to disquietude and chaos, the aversus arguably has the ability to produce a positive educative outcome. Revisiting Baudrillard, while the aversus “allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory” to exist while simultaneously competing with one another, its inability to reveal truth may be the perfect foil to the museum’s dual identity as both a simulacrum and an interpretive, mediating authority (178). Because the museum is a simulacrum, it masks reality to become its own hyperreality. Yet, its purpose, according to its designation as the locus of institutionalized culture, necessitates that it supposedly espouse truth. This elucidates the impossible situation of museums, but also realizes the potential they have to generate useful dialectics via the aversus.

While Baudrillard foresaw this dialectical ability of the simulacrum as a step toward both chaos of meaning and the degeneration of ordering systems, its effects may be less negative than proposed. Because museums are simulacra, and therefore unable to espouse definitive truths on the nature of reality, they can instead reposition their authority exclusively onto their mediating function. Implemented as a guiding strategy, museums could circumvent dubious truths as opposed to leading open-ended discussions via their exhibition displays. Theoretically, this could be accomplished through the deliberate generation of controversy, where controversy is defined as a constructive outcome allowing for individual interpretation to take precedence over didactic truth. In practical terms, this could be achieved via the curatorial research, the objects on view and the text panels, where all are selected and refined to create exhibitions that maximize discussion through considerate ambiguity. While it remains that the aversus may still lead to a sense of discomfort by potentially defamiliarizing visitors with their extant knowledge base, it nevertheless allows for the creation of new meaning by forcing audiences to contend with disparate perspectives. In the case of the museum, the *experienti aversus* transcends the *unheimlich* of the reproduction. Rather, museums are able to take the displacement and eradication of reality inherent to the aversus and reformulate it as a constructive strategy. Thus, the positive attitude espoused by Deleuze ap-

pears to be transferable to the aversus, and moreover belies the notion that reality is best addressed through “hard facts.” Instead of being encapsulated in a single notion, truth exists in the interstice between polemic engagements. In this conception, the aversus offers an effective model for the education and representation of reality through confrontation: truth cannot be revealed through dictation, but instead is best understood through dialectics.

This does not mean that the effectiveness of the aversus is by any means universal: controversy can often lead to greater misunderstanding, and ambiguity to confusion and apathy. While I would suggest that a rethinking of Baudrillard and the development of both the *experienti aversus* and the *experienti affinitas* can create new avenues for knowing, this is at present a philosophy of potential, not an effective, implementable plan. Yet, imperatively, museums and all simulacra must not become entrenched in Baudrillard’s doomed perspective: To allow this would be to accept all information as fallible, and therefore negligible. With society’s constant progression, it must be assumed that a scaffold of knowledge has permitted this progress, and therefore that truth is achievable. The simulacrum-as-mediator has the potential to reveal innumerable paths to knowledge; it is not truth in-itself, or a destructive entity. Instead, it can outline reality through the creation of as many divergent interpretations as possible, where these perceptions engage constructively with one another.

### *Diana McNally*

pursues a polymathic lifestyle as a graphic designer, illustrator, artist, writer, DJ and instructor at both Ryerson University and Centennial College. Her intellectual preoccupation lies with architectural theory and the *unheimlich*. Inexplicably, she can also be seen on-screen opposite Channing Tatum in *The Vow* (2012).







# *Surrealist Self-Portraiture:* *Aesthetic Mediations of Mixed-Race Women's Stories*

Over the course of many visits to the Art Gallery of Ontario I have begun to notice echoes. These echoes drift between the self-portraiture of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo and Canadian photographer Meryl McMaster; separated by time and place their works nevertheless affect me in similar ways. The “Frida & Diego: Passion, Politics and Painting” retrospective

at the AGO offered a comprehensive and well-received selection of Kahlo’s work; now, a year later, Meryl McMaster’s *Victoria* (2013) has made its debut in the AGO Canadian Collection display. Both artists employ visual narratives to reveal the ‘surreal in the real.’ Their works alter the viewer’s sense of space and time, and offer a platform for reflection

---

as they retell their own pain and trauma. Their stylistically Surrealist self-portraits, which are nevertheless grounded in lived experience, have a particularly emancipatory power because they occupy a space of the in-between. Kahlo and McMaster merge atmospheres, eras, cultures, identities and realities, and reveal that few entities are more complex than the self. Their works champion a sense of resilience, and depict triumphs over limitations, anguish and loss—and they offer a space for viewers to do the same.

This essay begins and ends close to home—both literally and figuratively. It circles around the AGO, a site near my own hometown, and my own process of healing. The work of Kahlo and McMaster has helped me come to terms with my identity as a queer male, and aided my own process of self-acceptance. Kahlo and McMaster both utilize Surrealist self-portraiture to elevate and value their own identities, and in doing so they have created a space for others to partake. As the writer and transgender activist Nina Arsenault notes: “Self-portraiture is a means of resisting death through images and stories that inscribe, ‘I live through this; I am transformed; I experience revelation.’” [1] I would suggest that the revelation Arsenault describes is not limited to the artist, but that it can be transferred to and shared by the viewer. The viewer can live through, be transformed and experience revelation.

My decision to discuss Kahlo and McMaster together emerges from personal experience; however, other critics have also noted parallels between their works. Paul Gessell of *Ottawa Magazine* wrote in an exhibition review of McMaster’s

---

works that, “You could describe [McMaster] as Canada’s answer to Frida Kahlo, who used her own image and life story to create surreal visions on canvas.” Undoubtedly, the two share a very particular admixture of personal biography and the surreal. This connection becomes particularly apparent in *In-Between Worlds* (2010-2013), a photographic series by McMaster that celebrates her half-Plains Cree and half-Scottish heritage. Enriched with an element of performance and storytelling, McMaster often presents herself, within her photographic works, as a representative not only for Indigenous peoples, but also for anyone who feels the anxiety of being in-between spaces and identities. As she explained in an artist statement at the Ottawa Art Gallery’s *In The Flesh* exhibition this past summer:

I began this body of work experimenting with how identities collide and mix, as this process is essential to who I am. Additionally, I’ve always been interested in the work of Surrealist artists, in conjunction with my interest in self-portraiture, performance, and tableau. *In-Between Worlds* grew out of these various elements and continues to preoccupy me. [2]

When looking at McMaster’s photographic self-portraits, it becomes immediately apparent that, in representing these collisions and mixes of identities, she embodies numerous people—many possibilities. She echoes the poet Walt Whitman: “I am large, I contain multitudes.” This confluence of identities demonstrates the power of using the self-portrait as a means to address race, culture and gender. Both Kahlo and McMaster challenge perceptions of reality and suggest that surreal visions possess authenticity and legitimacy.

---



---

I look at McMaster's *Anima* (2012), and I love the delicateness found in this image. The camera focuses on McMaster's face as she stands, bare-shouldered, in a wintry outdoors landscape. Slightly blurred and hazy, the overall monochromatic nature of the background and McMaster's own body is punctured by dozens of butterflies in brilliant magentas, ochres and greens. They hover around McMaster's head, seemingly wrapping her in a flurry of wings. During an artist talk at the Art Gallery of Peterborough Meryl mentioned that *Anima* refers to "the soul" in romance languages, and how butterflies (in Cree storytelling) would be the messengers of the soul." [3] So the butterfly serves as a cross-cultural symbol, connecting Indigenous and European heritage. *Anima*, a particularly powerful self-portrait, not only embodies McMaster's experience and personal journey, but also renders her self-image inclusive of a multitude of other stories.

When considering the work of Frida Kahlo, her biography and output seem inextricably linked. Even her early paintings are read through the lens of her life in its entirety, and various elements are held up as foreshadowing the events to come. While there are dangers to this slightly hagiographic tendency, her work undeniably intersects with her identity, and her legacy has become a part of the painting's aura. Nowhere is this more evident than her self-portraits. As Dot Tuer and Elliot King, curators/editors of the "Frida & Diego" catalogue text, note:

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits reflected her identity as a mestiza (of mixed European and indigenous heritage)

---

---

and Mexico's rich cultural traditions through references to folk art, traditional jewelry, and indigenous clothing. [4]

Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Monkey* (1938), for example, resonates strongly with McMaster's *Victoria*. Both self-portraits present the artists with various traditional accoutrements—Kahlo's bead necklace and McMaster's feather, for example. Both artists merge worlds.

With its Surrealist approach to self-portraiture, *In-Between Worlds* demonstrates the power of suspension from reality. The series shows that an artist's self-reflection can become a platform for viewers to take a moment to release, heal and move onward. These moments of suspension—a kind of freezing of time and transformation of space—can also be found in the self-portraiture of Kahlo. While many contemporary artists echo Kahlo's Surrealist self-portraiture stylistically, few manage to establish the opportunity for reflection and contemplation that McMaster's work encompasses—particularly for a variety of viewers from countless walks of life. Each offers an aesthetic reflection that mediates past and present in narrative space.

This jilting quality—a sense within viewers that a rupture in the fabric of reality has occurred—connects with literary theorist Roger Luckhurst's definition of "a general trauma aesthetic." He suggests that this aesthetic is:

Marked by interruptions, temporal disorder, refusal of

---



---

easy readerly identification, disarming play with narrative framing, disjunct movements in style, tense, focalization or discourse, and a resistance to closure that is demonstrated in compulsive telling and retelling.” [5]

Additionally, historian David Kennedy notes that, “Trauma narratives tend to favor aesthetic experimentation and innovation as a means of avoiding ‘domesticating cultural conventions.’” [6] While a viewer yearns to empathize with the artist’s displays of physical and/or emotional trauma, this emphasis obviously occurs differently and on separate terms. The viewer cannot subsume or appropriate the artist’s experience. At the same time, Kahlo and McMaster retell their stories as a way of showing that they have never disappeared. As Arsenault wrote, “Living self-portraiture is... the REDEMPITIVE POWER TO SIGNIFY. It is to see, create, and vivify a rich personal mythology through the potentialities of life and culture. It is THE PRESENCE OF BEING at the nexus point of imagination and reality.” [7] Kahlo and McMaster firmly occupy this nexus between imagination and reality, and use it to tell their stories.

The iconic paintings of Kahlo are grounded in her use of Surrealist imagery, but also, simultaneously, her consistent depiction of real life. As art historian Hayden Herrera wrote:

Frida is down to earth. She has, in fact, depicted “real” images in the most literal, straightforward way. We may not know what each detail means, but she did. Frida’s poetry is not one of subtle nuances. Nothing is amorphous or blurry. She draws her lines and is utterly concrete. [8]

---

---

I find myself wondering how Kahlo provokes myself, the viewer, by explicitly visualizing and externalizing the agony and physical pain she endured—images of which fill her oeuvre. Just one example is the devastating *Broken Column* (1944), which reflects her fragility by representing her spinal cord as a crumbling architectural support. Despite the slightly surreal composition, the work makes no attempt at evading or easing her reality. Instead, it allows her to put her pain on canvas. It compulsively tells.

Ultimately, I find myself working further toward redemption and healing in much the same manner that Kahlo and McMaster used self-portraiture to tell their stories onto canvas. While their works are increasingly valuable in the art world and popular culture, they are also important on the level of the personal and the individual. Their visual narratives carry the Surrealist ability to disrupt, but, more importantly, they allow multiple meanings to exist within the boundaries of their frames, and offer a opportunity for mutual healing for the viewer and artist alike. Although life undoubtedly possesses hardships, Kahlo and McMaster use their visual narratives to suggest that we can put these stories onto the canvas and let them stick there. In short, all of us wish to feel better with time.

### *William Brereton*

Currently lives in Peterborough, Ontario. He graduated with a Bachelor’s Honours degree in Cultural Studies at Trent University this past Spring 2013. However, he is currently a “Victory Lap” student, enrolled in additional Cultural Studies courses. In addition, William works part-time as contract staff at the Art Gallery of Peterborough. During his spare time, he loves visiting art galleries “around the world” – contemplating the artworks on display and writing reflections in his journal.

